

The Doctrine of Signatures

A Guide to the Essence of Plant Properties

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One of the ancient methods used to determine the properties of plants is the “doctrine of signatures.” The basic idea is that the plant looks like the tissue, organ or disease for which it is remedial. For example, celandine (*Chelidonium majus*) has a bright yellow sap. As far as I am aware, there is no other plant in temperate North America or Europe which has such a sap (except for a closely related cousin), so this attribute is quite unique – it is a “signature” or “sign” showing how the plant may be used. Since the bile made in the liver, secreted by the gall bladder and used to emulsify fats in the intestines is yellow in color the ancients decided that this unique plant must be for bile. Indeed, down to the 1950s *Chelidonium* was official in the U. S. Pharmacopoeia as a remedy for congestion of the liver and gall bladder.

Both this remedy and the concept of gall bladder congestion have now been forgotten by modern medicine but celandine is still used in herbalism for swelling of the liver and gall bladder. I myself once treated a case of hepatitis C with *Chelidonium* so successfully that the blood test and the biopsy could find no sign of the virus. The doctor declared it a “miracle” rather than giving the herb any credit.

The doctrine of signatures is one of the articles of traditional herbalism which is most misunderstood by modern researchers. The idea that the shape or color of the plant should reveal its properties smacks of “magical thinking,” or “thought by association” or “analogy” rather than by reductionism and cause and effect. In medicine the components of the plant are reduced to their smallest potent parts – molecules – and these are analysed for their effect on the body. No other method of understanding is acknowledged.

When one reads the old books on the doctrine of signatures one can in fact see such entirely fallacious “magical thinking.” Agrippa von Nettesheim, one of the Renaissance advocates of signatures, says that the right paw of the turtle will be a medicine for the right foot of the man and likewise, the left paw to the left foot. But if we are more insightful and not blinded by modern prejudices, only looking to support the materialist, reductionist view of science, we can see that there is a deeper way of thinking about plants and disease to which the doctrine of signatures is pointing.

The Forces of Nature and the Creation of “Signatures”

Every plant represents a finely honed response to environmental stress – the exact same stress that human beings must contend with in order to stay healthy. The wide array of chemical compounds in the plant, as well as its shape, color and environmental niche all represent adaptations to stress. The plant has been molded in response to stress. There is no room for extra chemicals or colors or extravagant shapes. It is a survivor and what it can do for itself it can convey to us as a medicine. The philosopher Rudolf Steiner pointed out that the same forces which cause disease in the human frame cause the

contortion of the plant. Thus, the “contortions” or shapes and colors, not to mention the environmental niche in which the plant lives, are “signatures” picturing the stresses and diseases to which plant is remedial.

There is also a deeper lesson. The doctrine of signatures teaches us to view disease and remedy in a “characterological” sense, or as specific patterns or identity patterns formed in response to stress. Each possesses an inherent logic and intelligence all their own. These responses produce patterns or “signatures” which we must learn to read in plant and person alike.

Even if we do not believe that the doctrine of signatures is God or Mother Nature’s way of showing us what the plant is for, it is still a good memory device, as pharmacist Ben Charles Harris points on in one of the only herbals ever organized on the basis of the doctrine: *The Compleat Herbal* (1977). Now out of print, this book is highly recommended for those interested in this subject.

The great apostle of the doctrine of signatures was the Renaissance physician Paracelsus (1494-1542). For a review of his theories see my book, *Vitalism, The History of Herbalism, Homeopathy and Flower Essences* (1993).

Signatures

There are several types of signatures, of which shape, color and environmental niche are most important. The niche where the plant likes to grow indicates whether it has an affinity to hot or cold, or hot and cold, or damp/dry problems. Plants that grow in or near water, or in sand or stone, tend to be concerned with water/solid balances and thus with the kidneys – horsetail, rattlesnake master, gravel root and gromwell. Plants that have large leaves transpire a lot of water through the leaf and since this is analogous to perspiration and respiration in the human world, such plants are usually excellent for the skin and lungs – elecampane, burdock, comfrey, mullein. Plants that are purple/red are often outstanding remedies for septic, putrefactive conditions which cause purple color in the skin: plantain, burdock, dandelion, phytolacca, etc. The burgundy red color is more for blood-building: yellow dock root, rehmannia root, beets, ho sho wu and sumach. The bright red color settles heat, which is associated with red skin color from congestion of the blood: rosehips, rose petals, hawthorn berry, wild cherry bark. These are but passing examples. More extreme cases are found where the plant bears an almost cartoon-like resemblance to an organ or disease.

According to American Indian medicine, the most powerful medicine plants are those that resemble animals. This is called a “spirit signature.” The plant possesses some of the medicine power of the animal. Thus we have snake remedies (Canada snakeroot, Virginia snakeroot, black snakeroot, rattlesnake master, rattlesnake plantain, snakeweed, asp lavender, etc.), bear medicines (burdock, osha root, bear root or *Lomatium*, spikenard, licorice, etc. - plants with brown, furry roots or seed pods) and elk medicines (staghorn sumach, blue vervain, wild bergamot, thistle, etc. – plant with antler-like projections).

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*). The leaf has been cut back, through evolution, to the vein or rib, so that it appears to be many leaves (*millefolium*). The vascularity of the plant is therefore emphasized. Yarrow is a plant which is highly resistant to weather changes. It grows fine on a hot summer day on a south-facing slope; in the winter time we kick off the snow and there it is, a

bright green leaf. Because of this “heightened vascularity,” yarrow is good for cuts and bruises, where it helps to move blood in or out. It has numerous mechanisms for stopping-bleeding and has long been used as a warrior’s remedy. It is named after the Greek warrior Achilles. It is also beneficial for controlling the temperature of the skin, by opening and closing the vascularity at the surface; thus, an ancient remedy for fever and chills. All blood regulating remedies are important female remedies as well; yarrow is important for profuse bleeding periods with bright red blood and often with fibroids. Finally, it cools off the digestive tract, removing irritation, heat, upset stomach, ulceration and disturbances of the abdominal viscera. It is specifically indicated by a red and blue complexion around the veins, an elongated, red, pointed tongue with a dry or withered, cracked center.

Elder (*Sambucus canadensis*, *S. nigra*). Elder has a similar signature and similar uses to yarrow. The stems or young branches are hollow and full of pith. They take several years to close up. Hence, elder personifies vascularity, not so much in the small vessels but in the larger ones, and indeed, not only in the blood vessels but in tubes of all kinds. It does move the blood, like yarrow, and is beneficial for fever, chill and influenza – use the flowers. It is less beneficial for cuts but used for bruises and sprains – especially when the tissue is swollen, pale and blue from retention of venous blood and water. In mild doses it is mildly laxative, diuretic, expectorant and diaphoretic – it moves the fluids through the tubes of the bowels, kidneys, lungs and skin. These are the four major channels of elimination so it has long been used to eliminate “humors” or “toxins” from the body. Also to open these channels when they are shut. The leaves are used externally on boils. Elder is specifically indicated by a skin that is harshly red and dry or blue and swollen, or especially when both are present.

Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*). The third of the great acute fever remedies is peppermint. This plant does not look particularly different from any other mint and what we say about it applies for the most part to the whole family. The mints have long, leggy, square-sided stalks. They don’t look like blood vessels but remind us more of nerves, which are subject to tension. The mints are famous for their nervine or nerve calming properties. In addition, peppermint has a stimulating, warming taste that quickly turns cooling – it is both warming and cooling. This indicates that it will help the body adjust to fever or chill, and especially in regard to the nervous system, so that it is more suited to the achiness, chills and upset stomach of fever than to the vascular changes. In addition, it is the most important remedy for sluggish digestion with gas, bloating, putrefaction and spasm.

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*). This mint has a lemony flavor so it is better suited to containing heat, rather than chills and heat, like the preceding mint. It is indicated when there is a nervous stomach with indigestion or pain in the stomach, heart palpitations with nervousness, hyperthyroidism and the heat of acute fever, especially in children.

Agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*, *A. grysoptela*). This is the most tense-looking plant I am aware of in my area. The hairs standing up on the stalks look

like hairs on a cat standing up in alarm. The “fight or flight” response is one of great tension. Dr. Bach first introduced agrimony as a flower essence for tension and it is a great one here: for mental tension hidden behind a facade, or for physical tension (holds the breath and lets it out with like pressurized steam). For gall stones, kidney stones, bladder and menstrual pain, ulcers on the extremities, allergic reactions, edema that comes and goes, alopecia, etc. Because it acts on the tension of the nerves it is also a remedy for chills and fever, which result from activity in the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system – same branch that controls the “fight or flight” response.

Rose (*Rosa spp.*) We use either the hips or the petals. The root, leaves and even the thorns have also been used. The bright red, fiery color of the rose petal or hip indicates that it has an affinity for fire. Rose is in fact cooling, not warming – think of rosehip tea on a hot summer day. It is also astringent so it is useful when there is heat conjoined with dampness or water running out of the tissues. Tongue elongated, red, with moist streamers down the sides.

Nettle (*Urtica dioeca*). Nettle is remarkable for the fact that it grows on ground that is saturated with waste products – barnyards, outhouse, ditches, septic system drain fields, etc. It is one of the highest plants in protein and it needs to grow in these places to pick up protein. It is the plant which tells the body how to deal with protein. It is indicated in food allergies with mucous in the intestines from poor digestion of protein; it is indicated in low blood pressure when the liver is not making good blood proteins to keep the watery aspect of the blood in the vessels and it leaks out into the tissues; when the kidneys are having a hard time processing protein waste products, there is gout or arthritis and the kidneys are sensitive and swollen; it even helps rejuvenate the kidneys when people are on dialysis. Finally, it helps paralyzed muscles and tissues to function better.

Boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*). There are several plants with “bone white flowers,” but this is probably the largest and most conspicuous when in bloom in the month of August. The leaves and flowers arise at the joints, alternating from side to side, indicating a strong affinity to the joints. It is best known as a remedy for the extreme achiness in the bones and muscles associated with influenza and (in the old days) malaria, yellow fever and dengue. It was once an indispensable remedy for severe chills and fever. The Indians use it in addition as a remedy for setting bones. I have seen it perform miracles in this regard.

“Spirit Signatures”

We now move on to what the Indian people sometimes call “spirit signatures.” These are cases where the plant looks like an animal. This is a good example of “magical thinking,” but it takes us deep into the inner essence of plants, where their properties stand in relationship to the rest of the natural kingdom. If we wish to have the skill and insight into plant medicines for which the Native American people are famous we have to jump ship and swim for “terra incognita,” i.e., a new way of thinking independent of science.

Sumach (*Rhus typhina*, *R. aromatica*, *R. glabra*). My favorite in this bunch is the staghorn sumach (*R. typhina*), which looks so much like the antlers of a young buck. It is and “elk remedy,” which means that it increases the strength of the kidneys and sexual stamina. Indicated in weak kidneys, lack of concentration of urine, clear, copious urine, weakness, weak lower back and knees, low sex drive and diabetes type II when there is frequent urination. It also is useful for acute cold and flu with moist discharge from the upper respiratory tract.

Burdock (*Arctium lappa*). This, of course, is one of the “bear medicines.” They are oily, brown, sometimes furry roots or seed pods which help to build up the oil economy of the body. Burdock stimulates bile secretion from the gall bladder to improve digestion of fats and oils and move the stool, it helps the liver process fats and oils and it strengthens the organs dependent on good fatty tissue like the adrenals (“the fat of the kidneys” in the Hebrew Bible) and the skin. Indicated in thin, dry persons with falling of hair, scalp problems, nervousness, lack of stamina under stress, weak kidneys – edema and stones. It is a famous “blood purifier” indicated in skin conditions; it tonifies the sebaceous glands. Also indicated in fever with profuse loss of oily sweat.

Plantain (*Plantago major*). This is one of the most common of the “snake medicines.” The little seed stalk looks like a snake’s head. Plantain is a famous “drawing agent.” When placed externally on the skin it draws out pus, bacteria, poisons, infection, splinters, dirt, etc. Hence, it has been used on poisonous bites with – to my knowledge – dramatic success.